



MACON COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
JUNE 4, 2024
CONTINUED MEETING MINUTES

Chairman Shields reconvened the meeting at 6:00 p.m. as recessed from the May 28, 2024, continued meeting. All Board Members, County Manager Derek Roland, Deputy Clerk Tammy Keezer, Finance Director Lori Carpenter, and County Attorney Eric Ridenour were present, as were a number of county employees, media, and citizens.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

- (A) Chairman Shields announced that the Public Hearing on the Fiscal Year 2024-25 budget would be held at the regular meeting on June 11, 2024, at 6:00 p.m. in the commissioner's board room.

FY 2024-25 BUDGET DISCUSSION:

SOUTHWESTERN COMMUNITY COLLEGE (SCC) – Dr. Don Tomas said he wanted to explain and talk about some of their budget requests. He provided a handout about the economic impact of SCC and the value the college brings to the people they serve in the region and Macon County. Dr. Tomas distributed a handout of the community college law and the operational needs list and a handout of their budget for Fiscal Year 2025 and referred to a page specific to the Grove Center indicating the campus has life safety issues and ADA issues and the requested amount to correct these issues is \$71,000 with approximately \$58,000 allocated to address other issues on the campus. Dr. Tomas shared needs at the Public Safety Training Center including the need to replace HVAC units. He said he respectfully requests that some attention be given to what they have requested. Mr. Roland said SCC asked for \$1.5 million and that our annual appropriation to them has increased 72 percent over the last two years as we have stepped up our support. He said there are needs across all of our departments that need to be met and referred to recent appropriations made toward SCC recently. A copy of the handouts provided are available in the office of the Clerk to the Board.

FRANKLIN FIRE TAX – Mayor Jack Horton said the Fire Department is not just the fire department for the city limits but is a whole fire district that covers outside the city limits as well. He said if you look at data Franklin Fire and Rescue (FFR) does a major share of the calls for the whole county. Mayor Horton talked about the need for a new pumper truck and a tanker truck and said it takes almost two years to get a truck once you put the order in at a cost of over \$1 million. He said all the money for operation of FFR comes from the fire tax and the Town Council was in full support of recommending a fire tax at seven cents and the current fire tax is just over five cents. Town Councilman Mike Lewis said he is not all about taxes, but that last year town residents subsidized the cost of the deposit on a truck which is not fair. Councilman David Culpepper said he voted against the Town spending the money last year to subsidize the fire district even though

the Fire Chief has been telling him for three years that we need this. He said if the board does not want to fund the increase then help them figure out a way to move forward and figure how the people who need the coverage get the coverage. Fire Chief Ben Ormond provided a handout regarding the number of calls that FFR responded to this fiscal year. He said FFR needs to be running in a pro-active, efficient manner. Mr. Ormond said he also needs to add personnel but before he can do that he is going to need to expand the current building which was built in the 1980's because it is at capacity. After a short question and answer period, Town Manager Amie Owens said she wanted to add that the Town cannot pass their budget unless the Board of Commissioners passes their budget because the Board of Commissioners sets the fire tax. She requested that the board approve the seven cents the Town was granted two years ago and referred to the letter written by the Town Council. Ms. Owens said the Town is who will have to answer citizen questions about this as well as account for how the tax is spent. She said she is respectfully asking for \$397,000. Emergency Management Director Warren Cabe said FFR is the most functional department in the county. He gave an overview of the history and talked about the fire study done in 2016. Mr. Cabe said he thinks we could look at setting three service district rates for Highlands, Nantahala, and Franklin as an alternative option for funding for the future if the board desires to do that.

ARTS FOR MCS – Maggie Jennings said she is here representing Arts for Macon County Schools and not Macon County Schools. She talked about the history of asking for positions for art and music in school prior to the pandemic. Ms. Jennings said she has come asking for three positions – the art teacher at Iotla Valley Elementary, the music teacher at South Macon Elementary and the art teacher at Macon Middle School. She requested a provision in the budget that if the House and Senate passes the 3% increase that those funds would be used for the purpose of these positions.

At 8:02 p.m. Chairman Shields called a five minute recess and the meeting reconvened at 8:10 p.m.

SOLID WASTE – Commissioner Shearl said he understands a portion of the increase in his budget was partly due to pay increases previously requested by Commissioner Higdon. Solid Waste Director Chris Stahl confirmed and added that there was also a request for an increase in the availability fee. Commissioner Shearl asked for a list of past, present, and future equipment that the Enterprise Fund has purchased, what happened to that equipment, and how many hours was on that equipment at the time of disposal. Mr. Stahl said he would get that information for Commissioner Shearl and that he included that information in his budget last year but did not update that this year. Commissioner Higdon inquired about the pay for convenience center workers and commented that the convenience centers were initially set up as a rush job and have never been changed. Mr. Stahl said the current starting pay is \$11.53 per hour with a proposal to go to \$12.53 per hour.

COWEE SCHOOL – Commissioner Higdon reported that the Cowee School was set-up years ago to be self-sustaining and inquired about seeing financial records before the board allocates funds. Ms. Carpenter said we do not see their financials and that the County is billed for the electricity and gas or propane we pay those directly. She said anytime Cowee School does renovations they have to have the work completed first, submit the bills and checks showing the items paid to her and they are reimbursed. Mr. Roland said we lease the building to them and they sub-lease it to other tenants. He said we try to keep improvements for ADA and such up since it is a county-owned building. Commissioner Young said he understands if they owned the building they could apply for more grants and other funding options.

COMMUNITY FUNDING POOL – Commissioner Higdon recommended doing away with the Community Funding Pool Higdon and said the Town of Highlands and the Town of Franklin both did away with their funding pool. Commissioner Shearl said he agrees.

SENIOR SERVICES ASSESSMENT – Commissioner Higdon inquired about the \$200,000 recommended for an assessment for the Senior Services building. Mr. Roland stated that the recommendation for a more in-depth assessment was identified on our space needs analysis in 2018. He said this would give us the funding needed to fully look at the needs and whether renovations or a new facility was needed. Commissioner Higdon said this number seems excessive for one location. Mr. Roland indicated that the Senior Center was not that high of a priority in 2018, but it was recommended to do a further analysis if chosen. After a brief discussion about current efforts to locate a new facility, Commissioner Higdon restated that this was in the Capital Improvement Plan and did not rank high. He encouraged board members to dust off that plan and look at that plan. Commissioner Young said if we do this assessment now then it will be ten years old in 2034 when it is time to take action. Mr. Roland said we just put a number there to be able to move forward. Commissioner Higdon cautioned about taking on more debt as there are a lot of capital projects on the horizon that will need attention.

TRANSPORTATION – Commissioner Shearl asked about the increases in salary and benefits. Mr. Roland explained how the Transit budget works and how much of that budget county-funded versus grant-funded. Commissioner Shearl said he is the liaison to Macon County Transit and said we need to let the hiker business go to a private entity. Commissioner Young said he understands this service is provided over a three-month period and will likely not be provided in the future.

TAX OFFICE – Commissioner Shearl asked about the upgrade to imager and asked how does it help the tax payer. He said even though we bought a state-of-the-art computer system a few years ago, staffing has not decreased in that department. Mr. Roland explained the growth in the tax base and that this imagery produces a much more detailed image with enough detail to check for measurements and additions without having to go out to the site. He said to view this as more of a cost avoidance by using the technology and not having to hire additional staff and is an expense that occurs every two years.

HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES – Commissioner Shearl commented that he knows about the request for \$171,000 to hire two new Environmental Health staff with the recommendation to not advertise those positions until January 2025. He said the board gave them \$25,000 the first time they fell behind and he thinks we should monitor this backlog and not give them the money until we see how things progress.

PARKS AND RECREATION – Commissioner Shearl asked how two full-time positions were eliminated. Mr. Roland explained the use of contract work for mowing and elimination of a position in Nantahala due to a retirement. Commissioner Shearl inquired about the details of the mowing contract and Mr. Roland explained the advertising and contracting process. Commissioner Shearl asked for the dates of the advertising and said that if done correctly the County could sub-contract all of the mowing and most of maintenance in the county and save the tax payers a lot of money. Mr. Roland explained that we are working toward contracting more services like this through attrition. He said we looked at contracting the custodial

services a few years ago and could not find a company closer than Asheville who was interested or within the budget. Mr. Roland said the contract mowing has been a good cost-saving measure and we continue to work toward that as much as possible.

MACON COUNTY SCHOOLS – Commissioner Shearl asked for clarification on the proposed increase which was explained by Mr. Roland. Commissioner Shearl asked why the county tax payers pay the 30 school teachers as indicated in the budget books and why the state funds are not sufficient to cover those costs, when Macon County tax payers are on the hook for the brick and mortar only. Commissioner Shearl pointed out that the request for a pay increase for county employees was less than the request for school employees. Commissioner Higdon said this is not right.

SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT – Commissioner Shearl asked several questions about vacancies, Courthouse Security, and the metal detectors and suggested that the vacant deputy positions be filled with the sworn officers working in Courthouse Security and the metal detectors be moved to the fourth floor outside the courtrooms.

BOARD OF ELECTIONS – Commissioner Shearl reported that the Board of Elections recently asked for funding for a special election which was allocated, and that only one percent of the voters casted a vote. He reminded the board that the Board of Elections had said if they were able to hold the special election in their office they could save the tax payers money. Commissioner Shearl said if the metal detectors away from the main entrances and put them at the courtrooms instead that would solve that issue. Attorney Ridenour said there is an order regarding metal detectors in the courthouse that he will share with the board. Commissioner Higdon said the number one thing in the Capital Improvement Plan was a new justice center. Commissioner Shearl said a new detention center and a justice center is a good investment.

SALARIES AND BENEFITS - Commissioner Shearl commented that this increase 1 from his calculations is the COLA (Cost of Living Adjustment) and the STEP. Ms. Carpenter added that it also includes retirement increases, insurance increases, and other required items. Commissioner Shearl inquired about the number of employees who retired last fiscal year and if we never replaced them how we have not seen a reduction in salary and benefits. Ms. Keezer indicated she would provide that information to him.

ADJOURN: At 9:45 p.m. Commissioner Young made a motions, seconded by Commissioner Shearl to adjourn. The vote was unanimous.



Derek Roland
Ex Officio Clerk to the Board



Gary Shields
Board Chair